Practice and Economic Geography

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Abstract

Economic geography has over the last decade become increasingly interested in the role of practice, conceptualised as the regularised or stabilised social actions through which economic agents organize or coordinate production, marketing, service provision, exchange, and/or innovation activities. Interest in practice is most clearly manifest in a growing body of research concerned to conceptualise how the regularized social relations and interactions linking economic actors (e.g., entrepreneurs, firms) shape the nature of economies, industries, and regional development processes. However, an emphasis on social practice faces significant challenges in that it lacks conceptual coherence, a clear methodological approach, and relevance for public policy. This article critically assesses the idea that practice-oriented research might or should become a core conceptual or epistemological approach in economic geography. In doing so, we identify at least four distinct strands to economic geographical interest in practice: studies centred on institutions, social relations, governmentality and alternative economies respectively. We then argue however that this shift towards practice-oriented work is less a coherent turn than a development and diversification of longstanding strands of work within the sub-discipline.

KEYWORDS: ***economic geography, practice, social relations, methodology***

1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, economic geographers have drawn extensively on ideas, concepts, methods, and theories from sociology, cultural, and science studies. To a large extent, this shift reflects the so-called cultural turn in human geography that began in the late 1980s (McDowell 1994; Crang 1997; Thrift 2000) and, more recently, a growing interest in relational theories for economic and social organization (Amin 2002; Sheppard 2002; Bathelt & Glückler 2003; Yeung 2005a; Murdoch 2006; Jones 2009). Cultural and relational approaches in economic geography have been driven in part by a dissatisfaction with individualist (e.g., neo-classical or rational-choice theories) and structural (e.g., institutional) approaches to the study of economies and industries, particularly their ability to conceptualize the social processes and power relations that constitute and transform real-world economic geographies. By focusing on the contextually situated social *processes* where agents and structures co-constitute one another, and where power flows in often diffuse and subtle ways, cultural and relational scholars have sought meso-scale or middle-ground (i.e., between individualist and structuralist) explanations for phenomena such as innovation, agglomeration, livelihoods, regional development, and/or global market integration.

In the context of this shift toward culture and relationality, economic geographers have become increasingly concerned with the role of social practices in economic activity (Bathelt & Glückler 2003; Jones 2003; Glückler 2005; Grabher 2006; Murphy 2006). Practices are the regularised or stabilised social actions through which economic agents organize or coordinate production, marketing, service provision, livelihood, exchange, and/or innovation activities. These routinized, institutionalised, or widely legitimated

formal and informal social interactions are critical for economic processes not only because they help to organize, structure, and reproduce economic activities, but because they help actors transmit power to one another and to interpret, manage, and/or derive meaning from, and establish identities in, the world. Practices are thus social and spatial forms that situate actors in relation to particular identities, meanings, forms of knowledge, and institutions and embed economic actions and relationships within and between particular places and times. For example, Knorr Cetina and Bruegger (2002) show how the ritualized and tightly, but often informally, regulated practices of currency trading help to constitute and reproduce global financial markets and the identities of traders. Similarly, the everyday practices (e.g., marketing, negotiation, regulation, caring, strategising, consulting, and production) carried out by actors such as households, firms, states, and industrial communities can play a key role in enabling (or preventing) improved livelihoods, industrial innovation, regional growth, wealth redistribution, and/or market internationalization (e.g., Amin and Cohendet 2004; Gertler 2003; Raco 2003; Glückler 2005; Smith and Stenning 2006; Palmer & O'Kane 2007; Pain 2008).

Economic geographers have become interested in a wide range of different forms of practice in the economy including: the managerial and knowledge creation practices relied on in particular industries and transnational firms (Amin and Cohendet 2004; Glückler 2005; Jones 2005; Faulconbridge 2008; Pain 2008; Palmer & O'Kane 2007), the governing practices of elites and states seeking to control and direct economies (MacKinnon 2000; Larner 2005; Rose-Redwood 2006; Traub-Werner 2007), and the alternative and/or 'ordinary' practices that constitute 'non-capitalist' economic forms such as cooperatives, informal livelihood strategies, or unpaid labor (Lee 2006; Smith &

67 Stenning 2006; Gibson-Graham 2008). As a concept, 'practice' has thus emerged (albeit
68 somewhat ambiguously) as a central element to economic geographies informed by a
69 'cultural economic' (e.g., Hall 2006), 'institutional' (e.g., Gertler 2001), and
70 'governmental' (e.g., Raco 2003; Smith & Rochovská 2007) approaches. Perhaps most
71 significantly, practice-oriented scholarship can be linked to 'relational' approaches in
72 economic geography where empirical and theoretical emphasis is placed on
73 understanding how the networks and social relations linking different economic actors
74 drive economic globalization, influence regional development processes, and shape such
75 phenomena as innovation, market integration, and workplace cultures (Dicken et al.
76 2001; Amin 2002; Sheppard 2002; Ettlinger 2003; Coe et al. 2004; Yeung 2005a; 2009;
77 Bathelt 2006; Weller 2006).

78 These trends have provoked the tentative suggestion that there has been a more
79 widely-defined conceptual, theoretical and empirical shift or 'turn' towards a concern
80 with social relations and/or practices within the sub-discipline. However, the idea that
81 economic geography should or has both undergone some kind of 'relational turn' - let
82 along a practice-oriented one – has been strongly contested and criticised (e.g., Overman
83 2004; Sunley 2008). Foremost amongst the criticisms levelled is that relational
84 approaches lack methodological rigor, explanatory power, sensitivity to structural factors,
85 and policy relevance. Setting aside the arguments about whether the terminology of
86 'turns' is appropriate, there appears to be significant concern that economic geographical
87 thinking anchored around ideas such as relationality or social practice is science built on
88 'fuzzy concepts, scanty evidence, and policy distance' (Markusen 1999). More
89 specifically, critics see relational and practice-oriented approaches as unable to develop

useful generalized theoretical arguments about the nature of the space economy and as restrictively focused on 'micro-scale' processes that do not provide insight into the important (and macro-scale) factors and forces that shape wider economic life. The dangers therefore of economic geography becoming increasingly focused on practice, at the expense of 'big' structural factors (e.g., class relations, institutions, neoliberal capitalism), are thus substantial if the sub-discipline is to remain relevant and of interest to policy makers and other decision-makers.

Yet we would argue that beneath this apparent pragmatic debate about what economic geography is for, and how best the sub-discipline should tackle key theoretical questions, lie more fundamental tensions concerning the philosophical foundations of economic-geographic thinking. The debate about the validity and utility or otherwise of practice-oriented economic geography in fact is as much about different views within economic geography of what concepts and theories are of use in understanding the economy with, in particular, schools of thought grounded in structuralist social science and quantitative/individualist (i.e., neo-classical utility maximization) methodologies articulating scepticism at newer schools of thought informed by poststructuralist social science and the aftermath of the cultural turn. Such a contention develops from two particular propositions with respect to the role of practice as a concept within economic geography.

First, we want to suggest that the notion of a 'practice turn' in economic geography is unhelpful. On the one hand, the idea of a practice turn masks the fact that economic geographers have been long interested in social practices as a constituent element of economic activity. In that sense, whilst there may have been a recent revival

and development of this interest in practice, it is not particularly novel. Equally, on the other hand, the notion of a recent 'turn' to practice implies greater coherence than exists across the diverse range of theoretical frameworks and conceptual perspectives concerned with practice and its influence on economic geographies. Thus we argue that the notion of a practice turn should be replaced with a wider discussion about the diverse and varied forms of practice-oriented economic geography.

Second, and in light of this, we suggest that the tension between practice-oriented economic geography and those grounded in structuralist and individualist approaches are neither as distinct nor as irreconcilable as some recent criticisms appear to imply. We further suggest that some of the criticisms levelled at practice-oriented economic geography are misplaced, grounded in problematic assumptions about the relative strengths and weakness of different methodologies. We also argue that a number of other criticisms that have been raised of practice-oriented work are based on misconceptions about what a theoretical emphasis on practice aims to achieve. For us, practice is a powerful, yet complementary concept in that it provides an analytical object that is situated between structuralist (e.g., institutional) and individualist (e.g., utility maximization) explanations for how economic and industrial change occur, one that offers a means to better understand how context, structures, and individual agency or action come together in the doing of economic and industrial activities. As such, practice can inform both structural and individualist accounts of the world, strengthen our empirical understandings of real-world economies, and improve the theoretical frameworks economic geographers use to explain the causes, drivers, and/or obstacles to

larger-order economic outcomes (e.g., innovation, regional development, path dependency, production networks).

The rest of this article elaborates these arguments in a series of steps. In the next section, we examine the concept of practice itself, assessing how economic geographers' understanding of practice has drawn on a variety of literatures from beyond the subject, particularly sociology, the sociology of science and political theory. The third section then examines the development and implementation of the concept of practice within economic geography, arguing that there has not so much been a recent 'turn' towards the concept as rather the development of a number of longstanding and interdisciplinary threads of interest within the sub-discipline. It further suggests that practice-oriented research does not represent a panacea for economic geography – an argument elaborated further in the fourth section as it outlines the major criticisms levelled at practice-oriented work. In light of these arguments, the final section ends by drawing together a number of concluding propositions about how practice-oriented research – though not without certain limitations - can form part of a complementary range of conceptual tools in future economic geographical thinking.

2 THE CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF PRACTICE

Whilst the concept of (social) practice has a long history within social scientific thought stretching back through the writings several major 20th century philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, and social psychologists, there are few contributions that try to develop practice as basis for a generic social theory (Reckwitz, 2002). Nevertheless some form of practice or practices conceived as social action rests at the heart of much social science is

158 seeking to theorise and understand. Indeed, one of the most influential twentieth century
159 sociologists, Harold Garfinkel (1967), even went so far as to recommend that the
160 discipline's subject matter should focus primarily on 'practical action' and its
161 implications for social organization.

162 A broad definition of (social) practices as used by social scientists thus
163 corresponds to 'the actions of individual or groups'. This conceptualization of action
164 includes not just physical behaviour but mental activities such as theorizing or learning.
165 Yet like many such generalized concepts, practice has a more specific and distinct
166 meaning within a number of schools of social scientific thinking. Its implementation in
167 contemporary human geography consequently reflects these rich and diverse foundations
168 and we suggest that three different strands of thinking about practice have been
169 particularly influential on human geographers who, since the cultural turn of the 1980s,
170 have drawn on these different theoretical strands and applied them to a wide range of
171 scholarly endeavours. A full review of these developments is beyond the scope of this
172 paper, but it forms the context in which the concept of practice has come increasingly to
173 the fore in economic geography. Figure 1 represents a diagrammatic attempt to illustrate
174 these foundations and their points of overlap or intersection with respect to the concept's
175 broad meaning and significance. Importantly, we do not assert that the role of social
176 practices carries equal weight in these literatures, or indeed that the objective of each of
177 these researchers is to theorize practice *per se*.
178

Figure 1: The social-scientific foundations of practice-oriented research

Structuring, governing, and resisting practices	Bourdieu	**Habitus**
	Giddens	**Structuration**
	Foucault	**Governmentality**
	Certeau	**Tactics**
Communicative and discursive practices	Habermas	**Communicative rationality**
	Bakhtin	**Dialogic practice**
	Schutz, Goffman	**Intersubjectivity**
	Latour, Callon, Law	**Actor-networks**
Organizing, learning and networking practices	Latour, Callon, Law	**Actor-networks**
	M. Polanyi	**Tacit knowledge**
	Wenger	**Communities of practice**
	Amin and Cohendet	**Relationality**

The first strand of literature is concerned with how practices help structure, organize, and govern cultures, societies, and nations. This issue has attracted the widest attention from sociologists, social historians and anthropologists. Central to such debates is the way in which individual or isolated practices interact with persistent social formations or structures. Within sociology, Giddens' (1979) structuration theory represents perhaps one of the key attempts to reconcile this relationship, viewing practices as everyday activities where agency and structure come together reflexively to create, reproduce, and/or restructure social systems in intended and unintended ways. In contrast, Bourdieu (1977) argues that cultural rituals and individual habits (his version of practice) reflect the dispositions or subconscious understandings the world (he terms this the *habitus*) that evolve historically and which position individuals within particular social classes or points in a culture's social structures. A further key contribution is that of Foucault (1991; 1997), whose concern with practice as a structuring tool emphasises the role of the state and its techniques of social control that he terms 'governmentality'. This concept aims to capture how even the mundane practices of government (e.g., town

planning, developing and maintaining statistical databases) are ideologically constructed technologies that create "fields" for intervention and domination by the state apparatus. In contrast to Foucault's rather grim interpretation of practice, de Certeau (1984) views everyday practices in a more hopeful light, seeing them as tactical compromises between an individual's need to conform to a dominant social order and her/his personal expression of identity, meaning, and values.

A second conceptual strand emphasises the role and importance of communicative and discursive practices – such as social performance, social communication, and language – in shaping societies, economies, and cultures. Social psychologists, symbolic interactionists, and ethnomethodologists (e.g., Goffman, 1959; 1974; Garfinkel, 1967) view communicative practices as ritualized or framed social performances or techniques of inter-personal communication aimed at achieving particular material or social outcomes. Communication is also a central theme for critical theorists such as Habermas (1984) who focuses on the role that communicative practices can play in helping individuals achieve a shared understanding or 'communicative rationality' that, while not resolving differences in opinion or between social groups, can create more plural and fair political systems. For Schutz (1967), successful communication between individuals requires intersubjectivity – a situation where social action becomes possible as individuals recognize and legitimate each others' verbal and non-verbal utterances. Similarly, Bakhtin & Holquist (1981) view practices in terms of dialogue and discourse, arguing that states and powerful social groups promote unitary forms of what he terms 'dialogic practice' able to promote particular ideologies and exclude marginal social groups by creating boundaries between appropriate and non-

appropriate forms of communication. Most recently, these ideas have been drawn on by actor-network (ANT) theorists (e.g., Callon, 1986; Law, 1992; Latour 2005) who argue that communication practices offer insights into the ways and means of *translation* – the process through which actors exert power, mobilize material objects, and perform socially in order to achieve particular objectives.

ANT's conception of practice has significant common ground with a third group of practice-oriented researchers, those interested in how practices embody tacit forms of knowledge and how they contribute to organizational cohesion and collective learning. Tacit knowledge is that which is practiced by and embodied in individuals and their conscious and subconscious feelings, identities, and circumstances (Polanyi 1967). Because of its practical and cognitive characteristics, tacit knowledge cannot be easily written down or communicated between individuals and is instead best transferred through observation, imitation, and experiential learning (Gertler 2003). Interest in tacit knowledge, and its role in organizational, industrial, and regional development, helped to spawn the communities-of-practice (CoP) literature. CoP scholars have used the concept of practice as an analytical tool to understand how organizations sustain coherence and cohesion, foster collective learning, and transfer (or fail to transfer) knowledge internally and externally (Brown and Duguid 2001; Wenger 1998; Amin & Roberts 2008). For Wenger (1998: 5), practice is "a way of talking about the shared historical and social resources, frameworks, and perspectives that can sustain mutual engagement in action." In other words, practices are the everyday activities embedded within organizational communities that serve as repositories of the tacit knowledge needed for long-run competitiveness. Furthermore, Amin and Cohendet (2004) contend that practices are

fundamentally social and spatial in that they are reproduced and changed through negotiations between groups of individuals who interact within and between particular locations and spaces. When one group of individuals recognize, legitimate, or validate the practices of another they become more relationally proximate and this, in turn, facilitates knowledge transfer and collective learning.

Few explicit theorizations or detailed examinations of the practice concept exist although some in sociology have sought to place practice at the centre of more explicit and generalized framework. Perhaps most significant is Reckwitz's (2002) assessment of the prospects for practice to become a stand-alone social-scientific philosophy. For him, practice may provide the scope to overcome some of the longstanding debates in sociology about social structure versus individual agency, and it might enable theory to move beyond the limitations of concepts like those of 'rational social or economic man'. To do so, our understanding of practice needs to move beyond viewing it solely as communicative, social, or material action, mental process, or discourse. Instead, practice should be conceptualized in multi-dimensional terms and as a form of social order that enables a "socially shared way of ascribing meaning to the world" (Reckwitz 2002: 246). A more generalized conception of practice thus offers an alternative framework that emphasizes the embeddedness of social meaning in the everyday world; meaning manifest in the "time-space assemblages" of body-minds, things, knowledge, and discourse, with both structures and agents serving as "carriers" of these assemblages (Reckwitz 2002). Importantly, and despite his rhetorical support for practice as philosophy, Reckwitz (2002: 259) recognizes that practice-oriented thinking remains less a grand theoretical framework than a "loose network of praxeological thinking."

For our purposes, the implication of these foundations and developing arguments for economic geography is twofold. First, they demonstrate that practice-oriented social scientific theorizing and research is hardly new or novel and that any purported 'turn' toward practice is, in reality, part of a long-standing progression toward theories better suited to elucidate the contingencies, agencies, processes, and power relations that constitute the space economy. Second, that practice offers not so much a new theory but an alternative epistemological framework in which knowledge of the social world may be most effectively derived through a focus on the actions, processes, relationships, and contexts through which and where the ordinary, real, and everyday world is constituted. In the next section, we examine how recent understandings of practice within economic geography have become increasingly informed by this developing perspective.

3 PRACTICE IN ECONOMIC GEOGRAPHY

The idea that practice can serve as a central organising concept in economic geography is a very recent one, and thus is not explicitly prevalent in the literature (unlike references to cultural, institutional or relational 'turns'). Moreover, engagements with practice within economic geography are not clearly or explicitly delineated given that practice often serves as a background element or factor in studies of political economy, innovation, networks, industrial organization, and/or regional development. The task of this section is therefore to review a number of different strands of what can be termed 'practice-oriented' work in economic geography. We suggest that at least four interrelated but distinctive threads of practice-oriented scholarship are worth identifying in this respect: institutional approaches, political-economic approaches, diverse-economy approaches,

and relational or communitarian approaches. Beyond identifying these threads, the goal here is to demonstrate that there are two key commonalities linking these literatures. First, that these authors explicitly or implicitly view practice as a concept or idea that can help to carve out a middle ground of sorts between structural and individualistic accounts of social and economic action; one where a focus on the everyday or routinized activities of actors reveals significant insights into both the cognitive characteristics of agents, and larger-order structures such as institutions, political economies, networks, and/or cultures. Second, that these literatures use practice as a means to better understand socioeconomic processes and/or the power relations governing economies. As such, practice is thought to provide important insights into how and why economic phenomena (e.g., clusters, livelihoods, innovations, growth) evolve, stabilise, or destabilise within particular time-space contexts.

3.1 Institutions and practice

The first strand of practice-oriented work distinguishable within economic geography centres on attempts to engage with the role of institutions and their relationship to social practices that constitute economic activity. This concern with institutions within economic geography has drawn on work from evolutionary economics (e.g., Nelson and Winter 1982; Lawson 1997; Hodgson 1999; Castellaci 2006), organizational theory and management studies (e.g., Scott 1995; Braun 2005), and technology studies (e.g., Lall 1993; Kemp et al. 1998; Ruttan 2001). What characterizes institution-based engagements with practice has been in particular a concern with seeking to understand how practices reveal the rules, norms, and conventions that govern, coordinate, and direct industries,

316 socio-technical regimes, and regional economies. Practices are particularly significant for
317 institutional evolution given that 'routinized productive activities carried out by a
318 population of heterogeneous firms [that] may generate a relatively stable pattern of
319 economic activities and relationships over time' (Castellaci, 2006: 863). A substantial
320 recent economic geographical literature has thus developed regarding the significance of
321 how economic practices are manifest in "conventional-relational transactions" that create
322 "untraded interdependencies" between firms and regions (Storper, 1995; Storper &
323 Salais, 1997), how the everyday practices of economic actors help to create and
324 reproduce larger-order socioeconomic structures (Wood and Valler 2001), how
325 institutionalized practices influence urban or regional competitiveness (Amin 1999; Sokol
326 2007), and how institutions are (re)produced by social practices that have different
327 spatialities (Yeung 2001; Hess 2004). Most recently, an interest in the relationships
328 between practices and institutions can be linked to evolutionary theories in economic
329 geography (Boschma and Lambooy 1999; Boschma and Frenken 2006)
330
331 ***3.2 Political-economic approaches to practice***
332 Another strand to practice-oriented economic geography draws on political-economic
333 concepts of social practice and, in particular, the concept of 'governmentality.' In simple
334 terms, the notion of governmentality seeks to capture how organised and often mundane
335 practices (including mentalities, rationalities, and techniques) that are encouraged,
336 enforced, and directed by elites and states govern and control individual subjects
337 (Foucault 1991; Rose 1996). Broadly stated, economic geographers in this vein have
338 become concerned with practice as they seek to more explicitly engage with the power

relations that shape economic activity and outcomes.[1] In this perspective, power, viewed in a Foucaultian sense as a series of strategies, techniques and practices“ (Allen, 1997: 63; 2003), can shed light on how states and multinational corporations strive to control firms, workers, and consumers through development policies and management practices that enable profit-taking and/or encourage particular kinds of (capitalist) behaviour (MacKinnon 2000; Hughes 2001; Murdoch 2004; Wilson 2006; Langley 2006; Clarke et al. 2007). These scholars have become particularly interested in the use by government and other regulatory bodies of ‘mundane practices and technologies of calculation, notation, and language’ which are central to the production of knowledge, fields of intervention, and governable objects/subjects (e.g., consumers, workers, investors, traders, development experts, urban futures) (Hughes 2001; Larner 2002; Murdoch 2004; Bulkeley 2006; Rose-Redwood 2006; Langley 2006). Relatedly, others have sought to understand how governmental practices maintain and create “hybrid, multi-focal configurations” of neoliberal capitalism (Larner 2005) and how they create disciplinary or prescribed spaces for capitalism’s extension into the life world (Raco 2003; Hudson 2004). Such practices are important to understand since they play a key role in sustaining structural inequalities based on race, class, and/or gender and in enabling corporations and states to expand their reach and control over consumers, citizens, and workers (James & Vira 2009).

3.3 Diverse economies, livelihoods, and everyday practices

[1] Some of the contributors to this literature would probably see their work as closer to political than economic geography, but it nevertheless forms one element of practice-oriented human geography concerned with the economic sphere.

The third strand to the economic geographical literature on practice is concerned with alternative interpretations of capitalism and what have been termed 'diverse economies or livelihoods'. This work has examined "ordinary" or everyday economies, and the "complex notions of relationality and power central to their practice" (Lee, 2002: 342). For Lee, such economic geographies are "constituted geographically, socially and politically – and hence practiced (Lee 2006: 421). In contrast to the rational economic actors and consistent structural features (e.g. markets) of conventionally understood capitalism, this diverse economies approach sees to conceptualise economic activities as practices that produce 'co-present and dynamic hybridizations of alternative, complementary or competing social relations [and] which may vary over the shortest stretches of time and space' (Lee 2006: 421). This strand of economic geography has thus become interested in the multiple rationalities and logics that frame economic action (Ettlinger 2003), the hybrid interactions between 'economic' and 'non-economic' actions (Smith & Stenning 2006; Pollard & Samers 2007), and the prospects for the emergence of non-capitalist or alternative economic forms (Gibson-Graham 1996; 2008; Lee et al. 2008). Empirically, scholars in this area have largely focused on the livelihood practices emerging in 'post-socialist' economies (e.g., Smith 2002; Smith & Stenning 2006; Smith and Rochovská 2007) and alternative forms of exchange or currency systems (Pacione 1997; Gregson and Crewe 2003; North 2007). Through an emphasis on everyday lives and alternative forms of economic organization, this literature has demonstrated how capitalism is subject to diverse practices that create negotiated accommodations or contingencies; contrary to monolithic interpretations of its constitution.

3.4 Relational approaches to practice

A fourth strand to practice-oriented worked can be identified around a broad category of 'relational' and communitarian approaches to economic geographical thinking. Here again economic geographers have looked to and drawn upon a range of works from sociology (e.g., Emirbayer 1997; Knorr-Cetina and Bruegger 2002), science studies (Law 1994; Callon et al. 2002; Bruun and Langlais 2003; Darr and Talmud 2003), and management and organizational theory (Wenger 1998; Adler and Kwon 2002; Borgatti and Cross 2003). In taking social relations as its central concern, 'relational' economic geography has a strong conceptual and methodological emphasis on social practice as it seeks to identify, interpret and explain the dynamic nature of interpersonal relations that shape economic outcomes. For relational economic geographers, practices serve: as "a source of coherence in a community" (Wenger 1998: 72; Hall 2006; Amin & Roberts 2008); as repositories of tacit knowledge (esp. in "best" practices) (Gertler 2001; 2003; Amin & Cohendet 2004; Amin & Roberts 2008; Faulconbridge 2006); as mechanisms that legitimate, control, and coordinate activities in firms and networks (Dicken et al. 2001; Glückler 2005; Yeung 2005; Palmer & O'Kane 2007; Jones 2007; 2008); and, lastly, as media that create relational proximity (and trust), thus enabling firms to act at a distance (Amin, 2002; Bathelt & Glückler, 2003; Bathelt et al., 2004; Murphy 2006).

The primary scale of analysis for relational economic geography is that of the firm (Dicken & Malmberg 2001; Yeung 2005b), and at least four objects of study can be identified across the relational literature: the core socio-spatial behaviours of businesspeople, firms, and industries (Jones 2003; Beaverstock 2004; Faulconbridge 2007); the relationships between these behaviours and outcomes such as exchange,

innovation, and profit making (Murphy 2002; 2003; Gertler 2004); the institutional and regional contexts within which such behaviours are enabled or supported (Maskell and Malmberg 1999; Amin and Graham 1997; Bathelt 2006; Murphy 2007); and the implications of such behaviour for regional development processes and wider trends in the global economy (Dicken et al. 2001; Coe et al. 2004). Beyond helping to describe the implications of social behaviour for performance outcomes in firms, industries, value chains, and economies, practice-oriented scholarship of the relational variety also provides important insights into the dynamics of innovation and knowledge production within particular industrial communities, knowledge that is often only realized in the "doing" of business (Wenger 1998; Amin and Cohendet 2004; Jones 2003; Gertler 2003; Yeung 2005a; Amin and Roberts 2008; Hall 2008).

Although these objects of study cover a diverse range, all share a conception of practices as everyday relational processes that constitute economic action and hold communities or firms together; processes that are embedded within geographic contexts, networks, institutional structures, power hierarchies, and in relation to spatial scales (Bathelt and Glückler 2003;Yeung 2005a). These processes are manifest as combinations of agency and structure produced and reproduced in regular patterns but which remain open to diverse, contingent, and unpredictable actions, expressions, and outcomes. At the heart of relational approaches, therefore, context, social meaning, and identity are central to interpretations of how practices shape competition, power struggles, learning, and innovation.

4 THE LIMITATIONS TO PRACTICE-ORIENTED ECONOMIC GEOGRAPHY

It should be clear from preceding discussion that there are multiple strands of practice-oriented work within contemporary economic geography that have roots in the so-called cultural turn in human geography and numerous interdisciplinary cross-fertilisations (esp. with sociology, management studies, and science studies) that have helped to shape economic geography theories since the 1990s. Although this approach to the social-scientific study of economic phenomena has promise, quite clearly there are theoretical and methodological challenges. At least four significant strands of argument have in one way or another been raised in the literature in this respect.

First, there is what might be termed a 'scale critique' which essentially argues that a conceptual focus on practice is too idiosyncratic and places too much emphasis on the micro-social at the expense of the macro-sociological/political. The consequence is that in terms of theorizing practice–oriented economic geography does not lead to an understanding of higher-level properties. Furthermore, this lack of capacity to understand higher level properties means that relational or practice-oriented work is unable to effectively theorise macro-scale structural forces and their historical role (Peck 2005)

Second is what we term the 'micro-to-macro validity' challenge which questions the capacity of a focus on specific micro practices to effectively understand the relationship between cause and effect (economic outcomes) (e.g., see Overman 2004). Practice-oriented economic geography thus runs the risk of being purely descriptive and 'fuzzy' because it cannot demarcate the boundaries between practices or know which practices, and at what scale, are more or less important. Such a critical engagement is

451 often based on the premise – from orthodox economics principally – that meaningful
452 statements about larger scale phenomena (e.g., regional or global economic trends) can
453 best be made through modelling exercises (e.g., econometrics) that maintain a strict and
454 linear relationship between individual behaviour and economic outcomes (c.f. Overman
455 2004).

456 Third, and related to the first two challenges, there are important concerns about
457 the policy and practical relevance of practice-oriented scholarship, particularly among
458 political-economic minded geographers. For some, practice-oriented work – especially
459 the work done by scholars of the relational variety – lacks the capacity to understand
460 structural power, inequality and uneven development. More specifically, critics assert
461 that relational approaches – particularly those that draw on network and actor-network
462 frameworks – underestimate or overlook the power relations and structural inequalities
463 influencing workers, firms, industries, and economies (Smith 2003). The consequence is
464 that a number of critics doubt the relevance of practice-oriented economic geography to
465 develop theories that have broad currency both more widely in the social sciences and
466 with policy-makers (Sunley 2008).

467 Fourth, practice-oriented economic geography also has important methodological
468 limitations. The key question is whether or not the methodological approaches used by
469 relational, cultural, or practice-oriented researchers – notably qualitative methodological
470 tools - can produce meaningful and generalizeable theories (Yeung 2003; James 2006;
471 Tickell et al. 2007). A counter-strand of the sub-discipline (and indeed within human
472 geography) thus questions the value, rigor and relevance of socio-cultural and relational
473 approaches to economic practices (Overman 2004; Sunley 2008). As Yeung (2003)

highlights, relational or practice-oriented research needs to meet the tri-partite litmus test of validity, reliability, and reflexivity if it is to successfully counter such criticisms.

While these critiques are significant, they are not insurmountable nor do they imply that practice cannot serve as a key concept for economic geography. What they do highlight is a constructive concern with how practice might be used to more rigorously explain why economic phenomena emerge, persist, or disappear within particular time-space contexts, what practice means for policy, justice, and/or welfare redistribution, and how researchers can actually "do" practice oriented research. For us, practices can only become viable as analytical objects if they can be coherently demarcated and isolated from other factors, if they can be shown to have a significant impact or influence on larger-order phenomena (e.g., regional development, global production networks), and if their study can contribute to or yield theoretical generalizations able to improve our explanations for economic-geographical phenomena. Although we cannot address how these requirements might be met here, we assert that the time is right for scholars interested in practice to focus their energies on developing general frameworks and methodologies able to do so.

5 CONCLUSION: THE VALUE OF PRACTICE-ORIENTED ECONOMIC GEOGRAPHY

The overarching argument of this paper is that the terminology of a 'practice turn' in economic geography is both unnecessary and largely unhelpful. The reason is that - as the diverse literature we have discussed illustrates – there is a substantial body of important work within economic geography that can be justifiably described as practice-oriented,

but it does not represents a single school of coherent thought. Many of those cited in this paper would not necessarily even identify their work as explicitly part of a practice-oriented shift within the sub-discipline. Furthermore, an interest in practice is not an especially recent or novel development as economic geographers are not alone in the social sciences in valuing a practice-oriented epistemology. Similar strands of thinking are also present in management studies, urban and regional planning and economic / organizational sociology. As such, it is perhaps more accurate to suggest there has been a deepening of interest in practice within economic geography over the last decade which reflects the continued interdisciplinary perspective of the sub-discipline.

That said, the practice concept has a lot to offer in terms of the empirical and theoretical questions it can be applied to. Empirically, the study of practice can provide important insights into the social and spatial dynamics of economic transitions, entrepreneurship, and industrial development. In transitional contexts (e.g., post-Socialist Europe, rapidly globalizing economies), as aptly demonstrated in the diverse economies literature, more "traditional" practices may be threatened or in flux as individuals, households, firms, and industries are forced to contend with new, and often formidable, challenges to their survival and success. How new practices evolve in such contexts, and what they mean for livelihoods, development, and social well-being, is an important area of research. So too is the study of the market internationalization and networking practices used by entrepreneurs, particularly those businesspeople striving to transnationalize their trade, production, and/or investment activities (e.g., see Yeung 2009). In this case, relationship development practices can yield important findings about how inter-cultural divides are bridged through the creation of "hybrid" practices

that may reflect compromises between individuals and the contexts they come from. Finally, a practice lens can also be applied to the study of new industries and industrial communities where exchange, communication, and innovation practices are only just beginning to emerge and where it is uncertain which forms are to become more widely institutionalized. In this case, empirical studies can help us better understand the trajectories of industrial development and the creation of path dependencies by showing how and why one practice or set of practices "wins out" over the alternatives and what it means for an industry and region.

Theoretically, a practice oriented economic geography has much to offer the four strands of literature outlined above (i.e., the institutional, governmental, diverse economies, and relational) as well as to other areas of the subdiscipline (e.g., environmental economic geography, global production networks, evolutionary theories). For example, a refined practice concept can improve institutional theories through its ability to show how routines (i.e., practices) emerge and become institutionalized such that they shape the evolution of regional economies and industries. Relational theories can also be enhanced, particularly through studies that analyze the regularized forms of interaction that constitute industrial communities and production networks. A key objective would be to improve conceptualizations of the power relations and socio-spatial processes that enable or stifle such phenomena as learning, upgrading, and/or market expansion. Lastly, among others, environmental and evolutionary economic geographers can also benefit from a focus on practice – particularly those scholars interested in more sustainable socio-technical regime transitions and the socio-spatial dynamics of urban and regional development (e.g., Wiskerke 2003; Frenken and Boschma 2007; Truffer

2008; Rock et al. 2009). The everyday, geographically situated, practices of consumption, production, innovation, planning, policy making, and environmental management are critical to understand if industrial and sustainability transitions are to be understood and conceptualized.

In conclusion, it is important to reassess the question of why practice and why now? For us, much of the impetus for economic geographers to focus on practice has arisen from the substantial and enduring critiques of the limitations of quantitative social science and its incapacity to develop sufficiently sophisticated or detailed understanding of how economic outcomes emerge beneath the level of regional or national economies. To revisit this fundamental epistemological debate within human geography and the social sciences is far beyond the scope of this discussion, but it is sufficient to note that a significant body of work questions the capacity of modelling techniques or even institutional theories to effectively explain the complexity of contemporary economic processes and outcomes. A (reinvigorated) interest in practice is in part precisely a response to dissatisfaction with the both the scale of generalization and validity of causal explanations (c.f. Sunley 2008) that other strands of economic geography lay claims to. Whilst as Yeung (2003) acknowledges, there are significant methodological challenges that face economic geographers with respect to developing effective methodological frameworks that enable the development of theoretical generalizations and higher level concepts, we do not see this as an impossible task, and suggest that critiques of practice-oriented research - particularly those associated with its relational aspects - do not succeed in discrediting the value of a practice-oriented approach.

Consequently, given the complexity of the global economy, it seems likely that economic geographers will be increasingly interested in practice-oriented research as a means to develop more effective theories of economic action. In this respect, we think that practice-oriented research should be viewed as a significant field of economic geographic research that complements rather than competes with others. It is not a question of whether the sub-discipline 'turns' to be focused on one methodology, scale or dimensions of economic activity or another, but whether it has the capacity to develop better and more sophisticated theories. In that sense, recent practice-oriented economic geography has made, and will continue to make, significant contributions.

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